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# **PHILOBIBLON**

*Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary  
Research in Humanities*

**Volume XVIII**

**Number 1**

**– January - June 2013 –**

**Cluj University Press**

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**OCLC number 271188595**

**Philobiblon is accredited by the National Research Council of Romania as a periodical having the chance to gain international import.**

**Philobiblon is published in 2 (two) numbers per year,  
the first in June,  
the second in December!**

**ISSN: 1224-7448  
ISSN (online) 2247 – 8442  
ISSN – L 1224 – 7448**

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**Aspects of Rorty's Legacy:  
Pragmatism, Hermeneutics, Politics\***

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**Keywords:** Rorty, pragmatism, hermeneutics, interpretation, globalisation

**Abstract:** In the following paper Richard Rorty's legacy is discussed according to the significance he contributed to 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. After a brief characterization of Rorty's thought in general, a selection of themes follows by highlighting certain aspects characteristic of his interests with reference, respectively, to pragmatism and hermeneutics, and to the interconnections of pragmatism, solidarity, and globalisation. As an autonomous research field, closely connected to Rorty's anti-foundationalism, I propose to draw on Hegel's criticism of Kant with regard to the concept of deposit. This may be called an argumentation against the obligation of providing arguments, very much in line with Rorty's dismissal of any neutral and ahistorical point of view. At the end of the paper I shortly assess the comprehensive significance of Rorty's philosophy and attempt to show an internal tension in his thought.

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*Richard Rorty* has undoubtedly left behind a rich legacy, including something that has rightly been called “a distinctive American voice in the history of philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to this perspective, his legacy may, however, be described from a wide variety of points of view. In the following paper I would like to develop shortly the following five points.

- 1) A brief characterization of Rorty's thought
- 2) Pragmatism and Hermeneutics
- 3) The Deposit Argument or an Argument Against the Obligation of Providing Arguments: Hegel's Criticism of Kant
- 4) Pragmatism, Solidarity, Globalisation
- 5) The Self-Understanding of Philosophy, or what is philosophy good for – an internal tension in Rorty's thought?

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\* A first version of this paper was read to a symposium in memory of Richard Rorty, organized by the Faculty of Humanities and the Philosophy Department of the University of Pécs, in cooperation with several European and overseas universities, in Pécs (Hungary), in May 2008. The text which is published here is a revised and enlarged version. I am grateful to the Hungarian National Research Fund for its support (Project number: T 75840)

<sup>1</sup> Steve Fuller, “Richard Rorty's philosophical legacy,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1 (March 2008): 121.

As a first step I will offer, in terms of some quick key concepts and joint commentaries, a brief glance on, or a summary of, the whole of Richard Rorty's lifework. The second point is connected to the first; I will attempt to go over and briefly sketch the link or tie between pragmatism and hermeneutics. The third theme is my most autonomous contribution; I will use Hegel's critique of Kant to back up some of Rorty's typically pragmatic claims. In the fourth point I will pick up a central pragmatic claim in Rorty and show how the theme of globalisation crops up in his thought. Finally, I will come back to focus upon Rorty's work as a whole and will try to show an internal tension in it.

### **1. A brief characterization of Rorty's thought**

Assuredly, there are numerous ways in which a philosopher's work can be approached, discussed or characterized. A uniquely subtle theorist, Richard Rorty's work with his complex and many-faceted interests is no exception. But Rorty himself is well aware of this fact which he has confirmed as follows: "Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions [...] what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced."<sup>1</sup>

Later on I will draw on this claim and will put forward some of the reasons why I for one find his work particularly stimulating and inspiring. In the first part of my contribution I would however like to resist this generous permission and will attempt, as far as my perception of his work goes, to give a more "objective" (to use this anti-Rortyeen way of speaking) characterization of that work. In addition to this, I would like to develop shortly the above-mentined four more points.

One way to sum up Rorty's extensive lifework with the help of some quick quips or key-terms may be to say that he is a philosopher of several "antis". Anti-representationalist, anti-essentialist, anti-Foundationalist, anti-epistemologist, anti-metaphysical: these are five key antis or nons (there may be more of them) which may aptly characterize some of his basic philosophical convictions. The version of pragmatism he avows goes even so far as claiming to be "anti-Philosophical,"<sup>2</sup> supposed you mean by philosophy a perennial, eternal discipline possessing its own stock of problems, called traditionally metaphysics.

Wanting to give positive designations, two terms come automatically to mind: historicism and contextualism. In the Introduction of his main work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty writes by way of anticipating the results of his book, and summing up the conclusions of his reading of three of the key philosophical figures of our century: "[...] the common message of Wittgenstein, Dewey, and Heidegger is a historicist one. Each of the three reminds us that investigations of the foundations of knowledge or morality or language or society may be simply [...] attempts to eternalize a certain contemporary language-game, social practice, or self-image. The moral of this

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 144.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), XVII: "The pragmatist tries to defend himself by saying that one can be a philosopher precisely by being anti-Philosophical, that the best way to make things hang together is to step back from the issues between Platonists and positivists."

book is also historicist [...].”<sup>1</sup> Concerns about what is labelled here “eternalizing a certain contemporary language-game,” were formulated, remarkably enough, already in his first significant publication, the “Introduction” to the volume he edited on *The Linguistic Turn* in 1967. The first sentence of this Introduction sounds: “The history of philosophy is punctuated by revolts against the practices of previous philosophers [...],”<sup>2</sup> and later in this Introduction it is made sufficiently clear that what the author is really interested in, and is looking forward to, is “*the creation of new, interesting and fruitful ways of thinking about things in general.*”<sup>3</sup> Thereby we have, as it were, *in nuce* the outlines of Rorty's later philosophical program. The failure or breakdown of foundationalism is shown in this early paper convincingly in a way very much logical or foundational, namely by the circularity of any attempt to found a method without tacit reference to some of the conclusions to be reached by that method itself. Towards the end of this Introduction he says: “I should wish to argue that the most important thing that has happened in philosophy during the last thirty years is not the linguistic turn itself, but rather the beginning of a thoroughgoing rethinking of certain epistemological difficulties which have troubled philosophers since Plato and Aristotle.”<sup>4</sup> Rorty will certainly not fail to contribute to this “thoroughgoing rethinking of certain epistemological difficulties” himself – a work to be done in *Mirror*. This effort will lead him significantly to dismiss the discipline of epistemology as such, and offer hermeneutics in its place. But the dismissal is so radical that hermeneutics is not even offered as a “successor concept” – epistemology should be abandoned once and for all rather than replaced by some other discipline.<sup>5</sup> Hermeneutics is put forward not in place of epistemology, as something that should take over its place – that place should remain empty.

## 2. Pragmatism and Hermeneutics

The above listed “antis” can perhaps aptly outline Rorty's pragmatic stance. Characteristic of Rorty's pragmatism is above all a dismissal of the “construction of a permanent, neutral framework for inquiry.”<sup>6</sup> Rorty professes a Deweyan conception of knowledge “as what we are justified in believing,” and a Jamesian conception of truth as “what it is better for us to believe’, rather than as ‘the accurate representation of reality.’”<sup>7</sup> The pragmatic way of viewing things lets Rorty “distrust intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 9f.

<sup>2</sup> “Introduction: Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy”, *The Linguistic Turn. Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. and with an introduction by Richard Rorty (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. (Italics mine.)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 315: “I am *not* putting hermeneutics forward as a ‘successor subject’ to epistemology [...] hermeneutics is not the name for a discipline [...] [it] is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled.”

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 9.



snobbery,” and lets him think it a bad idea that “you have something more to rely on than the tolerance and decency of your fellow human beings. The democratic community of Dewey's dreams,” he goes on to say, “is a community in which everybody thinks that it is human solidarity, rather than knowledge of something not merely human, that really matters.”<sup>1</sup>

The cooperative element inherent in pragmatism predisposes, so to speak, Rorty towards a conversational or hermeneutic view of rationality. On this view, “to be rational is simply to discuss any topic – religious, literary, scientific – in a way which eschews dogmatism, defensiveness, and righteous indignation.”<sup>2</sup> Conversation, just like any other kind of human cooperation, takes always place in a given context, it is always context-dependent, and thus we have here another motive for an overall contextualism. Rorty spells this out as follows: “there is no way to divide things up into those which are what they are independent of context and those which are context-dependent.”<sup>3</sup> The quickest possible way, so it seems to me, to arrive from a pragmatic stance at a hermeneutical position can be construed as taking its point of departure from contextualism. “Suppose we are antiessentialist all the way. Then we shall say that *all* inquiry is interpretation, that *all* thought consists in recontextualization, that we have never done anything else and never will.” “[...] we shall have to stretch the term 'interpretation' to cover what stockbrokers, geologists, actuaries, and carpenters do.”<sup>4</sup>

Against this background interpretation is not merely a mental activity taking place in the minds of isolated individuals. Rather, it is construed as a collective undertaking involving the life of a community of people. Life is conceived thereby not merely as something being lived *and* interpreted (i.e., occasionally also interpreted), but *is* interpretation or self-interpretation. “The pragmatists tell us that the conversation which it is our moral duty to continue is merely our project, the European intellectual form of life. It has no metaphysical nor epistemological guarantee of success. Further (and this is the crucial point) we do not know what 'success' would mean except simply 'continuance.' We are not conversing because we have a goal, but because Socratic conversation is an activity which is its own end.”<sup>5</sup>

I think Gadamer would have had no great difficulty in subscribing to a large portion of what is said here. All the more so because what he calls *Bildung* (and what Rorty translates as edification) is for him “an activity which is its own end.”<sup>6</sup> He would perhaps have added something to the effect: conversation is surely an end in itself, and it is especially successful when it is able to provide insight [Einsicht] into the matter.

From his pragmatic perspective Rorty is able to detect further practical or political aspects of hermeneutics – aspects which continental interpreters tend typically

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, 98.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, 102.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 172.

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Nohl, 1986), 17; see *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), 11.

to overlook or push into the background. Indeed, over and above being participants in a conversation, hermeneutics views participants “as united in what” may be called “societas—persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground.”<sup>1</sup>

This notion is closely related to, and points towards, the notion *Bildung durch Wissenschaft*, edification through scholarship, comprehending the whole Humboldtian idea of the university and intrinsically rooted in early modern and classical Neo-humanistic thought. The concept of *Bildung*, edification or self-formation, may be construed as implying the idea that accumulating knowledge is not an end in itself. Nor is it, for that matter, an aim to any, so to speak, worldly use or application. It is, instead, in the service of, and in favour of, self-formation.

In the closing chapter of his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,<sup>2</sup> notably in working out what he called “the ‘existentialist’ view of objectivity” and the ensuing distinction between “systematic philosophy” and “edifying philosophy,” Rorty drew heavily on Sartre, whose name appears here frequently together with those of Heidegger and Gadamer. Indeed, that is the first time that, to my knowledge, these three names are listed one after the other: Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer.<sup>3</sup>

Rorty's drawing upon Sartre<sup>4</sup> is obviously conditional upon his own understanding of hermeneutics as an edifying rather than a systematic philosophy – a philosophy of continuing conversation, of solidarity – a comprehension which, on its turn, relies for his version of hermeneutic philosophy upon the pragmatic tradition of American philosophy and may be said to provide some kind of an Anglo-American equivalent of German “praktische Philosophie.”

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 318.

<sup>2</sup> See *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p 360ff., 375ff.

<sup>3</sup> It would be worthwhile examining the reasons of this omission in continental philosophy. These probably go back to Heidegger's criticism of Sartre in his postwar “Letter on Humanism” for failing to ask the “Being-question.” Disciples of Heidegger like Max Müller seem then to have whole-heartedly adopted this standpoint (see, e.g., his dismissal of Sartre in his book *Existenzphilosophie im geistigen Leben der Gegenwart*, whose first edition appeared in 1949; see now the 4<sup>th</sup> enlarged ed., *Existenzphilosophie. Von der Metaphysik zur Metahistorik*, ed. A. Halder [Freiburg/München: Alber, 1986], 22, 70ff., and 73, where he restates the not infrequent misinterpretation of Sartre's work, perhaps in order to avert it from Heidegger, also victim of it several times, that “Nicht Zeuge des Seins, wie bei Heidegger, sondern Erzeuger des Seins ist bei Sartre der Mensch”), as a consequence of which a productive confrontation could not take place. The name of Sartre does not turn up in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. Characteristically, the most detailed and thorough comparative study of Heidegger and Sartre stems, again, from an American author (see Joseph Fell, *Heidegger and Sartre. An Essay on Being and Place* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1979]).

<sup>4</sup> For more on this point, see István M. Fehér, “Sartre and Hermeneutics,” *Man and World. An International Philosophical Review* XXVIII, 1995, 65–81, reprinted in: *Sartre and Existentialism. Philosophy, Politics, Ethics, The Psyche, and Aesthetics*, ed. William L. McBride, vol. IV: *Existentialist Ontology and Human Consciousness* (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997), 355–371.

### 3) The Deposit Argument or an Argument Against the Obligation of Providing Arguments: Hegel's Criticism of Kant

I take Rorty's pragmatic and antiessentialist attitude to be admirably spoken out in the following quote: "We must insist that the fact that nothing is immune from criticism does not mean that we have a duty to justify everything."<sup>1</sup> I would like to substantiate and back up this typically pragmatic claim by reference to a passage of Hegel – a typical historicist in Rorty's eyes – one in which he criticises Kant. But before doing so, I would like to put forward some more quotes by Rorty which are relevant to the notion to be developed in one way or another.

"The antifoundationalist's central claim is that attempts to ground a practice on something outside the practice will always be more or less disingenuous. As we antifoundationalists see it, the object outside the practice, the purported foundation, is always just a hypostatization of certain selected components of that practice."<sup>2</sup>

What may be called "the limitations of arguments" consists in the fact that

"we cannot justify our beliefs [...] to everybody, but only to those whose beliefs overlap ours to some appropriate extent."<sup>3</sup>

"It is a consequence of James's utilitarian view of the nature of obligation that the obligation to justify one's beliefs arises only when one's habits of action interfere with the fulfilment of others' needs."<sup>4</sup>

"[...] nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and [...] there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence."<sup>5</sup>

In his attempt to find good arguments for his moral theory in general and, more specifically, to show what we today would call the generalisability of the categorical imperative, Kant resorted in his *Groundwork* to the argument of the deposit. It is inherent in the concept of deposit, he argued, that you should not retain, keep or steal it. Were you to do so, he went on to argue, it would result in eliminating the very concept of deposit. If you were to steal a deposit it would lead to the fact that everybody else might do so – therefore they would no more be deposits. If there is something such as a

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, "Idealizations, Foundations, and Social Practices," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 333. See further *ibid.*, 335: "Kant undermined knowledge to make room for moral faith." See also *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 155: "When philosophy goes antifoundationalist, the notion of 'source of evidence' gets replaced by that of 'consensus about what would count as evidence'."

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 178.

deposit, then the very concept of it implies – analytically, as it were – the urge that you should not steal or keep it. Thereby Kant believed to have found what may be called a conceptual argument for his moral theory. But surely, it was Hegel's rejoinder, Kant's argument is not radical enough. What it amounts to saying is no more than this: once there is something such as a deposit then it would really be contradictory to steal it. Wanting there to be deposits and stealing them would be a contradiction. But what contradiction would originate from the fact that there is no such thing as a deposit? The source of the contradiction is that you cannot want both to have deposits and permitting stealing them. Once there is *s*, then *p* is inherent in it. You cannot want the predicate unless you want the subject. But if there is no subject either, then the predicate, and together with it, the contradiction simply disappear.

I think Hegel's argument perfectly holds. Thereby it amounts to something such as a good argument against (the obligation of putting forward) arguments. A deposit, Hegel suggests, is a social institution, rooted in social practices. There is no contradiction to imagine societies which can do without it – and surely there have been societies for which this institution has been unknown. Thus the argument that you should not steal a deposit, for if you did so, in virtue of the generalisability principle, there were no deposits, is not a good argument. The reason you do not steal a deposit is not that you have found a good argument for not doing so, but is just historical contingency. It is the fact that our society operates in a way that it is not customary to steal a deposit. For doing the right thing rather than the wrong, Hegel argues, you should not look for arguments. The problem with Kant is not that his argument is not good enough. It is, more importantly, the fact that he looked for one. Paradoxically enough, it is precisely to attempt to find a good argument that shatters the thing you wanted to justify or found. What the argument achieves is just the contrary of what it was expected to achieve: for now you can think unless you found a good argument you could feel free to keep other people's propriety. You could think that until you have found a good argument the thing remains uncertain or undecided; you may or may not keep a deposit. You just do not steal a deposit – that is all there is to it, it does not call for any good argument. As we have quoted Rorty as saying: “attempts to ground a practice on something outside the practice will always be more or less disingenuous;” “we cannot justify our beliefs [...] to everybody, but only to those whose beliefs overlap ours to some appropriate extent.” “[...] the obligation to justify one's beliefs arises only when one's habits of action interfere with the fulfilment of others' needs;” “nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept.” The justification of the fact that we do not steal a deposit is, ultimately, that we have always already accepted it, that we have grown accustomed to living in a society of which this institution is a part.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The relevant passages concerning the deposit argument in Kant and Hegel are the following: Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A 48ff. in Kant, *Werkausgabe*, ed. W. Weischedel, vol. VII (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 135ff.; G. W. F. Hegel: “Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts seine Stelle in der praktischen Philosophie, und sein Verhältnis zu den positiven Rechtswissenschaften,” in: Hegel, *Jenaer kritische Schriften*, eds. H. Brockard, H. Buchner (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983), 90–178; especially 116 (= *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 4, hrsg. H. Buchner, O. Pöggeler, Hamburg:

#### 4) Pragmatism, Solidarity, Globalisation

Rorty's concern about the given state of a community and his emphasis on solidarity leads him to take up social and political issues of the contemporary world – issues such as, e.g., globalisation. Let me just select some passages that seem particularly relevant to me, and then summarily comment on them.

“If the formation of hereditary castes continues unimpeded, and if the pressures of globalization create such castes not only in the United States but in all the old democracies, we shall end up in an Orwellian world. In such a world, there may be no supernational analogue of Big Brother, or any official creed analogous to Ingsoc. But there will be an analogue of the Inner Party – namely, the international, cosmopolitan super-rich. They will make all the important decisions.”<sup>1</sup>

What I find significant is the idiom “hereditary castes.” For it shows how modernity is threatened to turn into its very opposite – a menace far from being illusory for Rorty.

Let me pick then up some passages criticising the Left.

“[The] Left is unable to engage in national politics. It is not the sort of Left which can be asked to deal with the consequences of globalization [...] the cultural left would have to transform itself [...] It would have to speak more about money.”<sup>2</sup> “The cultural Left often seems convinced that the nation-state is obsolete [...] The trouble with this claim is that the government of our nation-state will be, for the foreseeable future, the only agent capable of making any real difference in the amount of selfishness and sadism [...] – It is no comfort to those in danger of being immiserated by globalization to be told that, since national governments are now irrelevant, we must think up a replacement for such governments. The cosmopolitan super-rich do not think any replacements are needed, and they are likely to prevail.”<sup>3</sup> Although the Nation-state has ceased to be the elemental unit of capitalism, “it remains the entity which makes decisions about social benefits, and thus about social justice. The current leftist habit of *taking the long view* and looking beyond nationhood to a global polity is as useless as was faith in Marx's philosophy of history, for which it has become a substitute.”<sup>4</sup>

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Meiner, 1968, 437); G.W.F. Hegel: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, neu hrsg. von H.-F. Wessels und H. Clairmont, mit einer Einleitung von W. Bonsiepen, (Hamburg, 1988), 287f. I have developed the deposit argument and interpreted the relevant Kantian and Hegelian texts in more detail in an earlier paper; see István M. Fehér, “Verstehen, Verständigung, Argumentieren, Gemeinschaft: Zu den praktisch-politischen Aspekten der Hermeneutik Gadamer’s.” *Existentia* VI–VII (1996–97): 65–78.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*. The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 98.

I have frequently had the experience that leftist intellectuals do typically become uneasy when hearing such talk about globalisation. They are reluctant to waste words and time on it except in neutral or even enthusiastic terms – or in terms of something that may perhaps have unpleasant features but is inevitable anyway, and thus must be endured with manly discipline. I find particularly relevant Rorty's putting things in terms of *taking the long view*. For it is indeed common to Marxists (or ex-Marxists) and liberals to overlook today's urgent needs and give you a kind of metaphysical comfort in the distant future – thereby making philosophy become engaged, once again, in apologetics, and producing ideology. Rorty's impressions about the atmosphere of recently liberated Central European countries are, accordingly, far from being enthusiastic. "I am terrified by the tendency, among intellectuals in recently liberated Central European countries, to assume that free markets solve all social problems."<sup>1</sup>

It is not uninteresting to note that Rorty's argument in favour of the Nation-state is a weak or negative one. In fact, he does not put forward positive reasons for backing it up. I take him not suggesting that we have good reasons for reliance in it; our expectations may indeed be thwarted. He just says that that is all we have at the present moment. It is just his reluctance to "take the long view," and to prefer the "short view" instead, that makes him say: *if* there is an institution today to protect the victims of globalization, then it is the nation-state. Whereby he does not suggest either that the nation-state will come up with this expectation, or that this is what it will be concerned with doing in the first place.

The continuity which Rorty establishes between Marxists and the current leftist habit is far from being merely illusionary. These are aspects of Rorty's thought which I find particularly meritable and wish he had expanded during his European tours more on them than on literary culture.

Let me finish this part of my paper with another quote which I think does not require any comments:

"[...] the central fact of globalization is that the economic situation of the citizens of a nation state has passed beyond the control of the laws of that state. [...] We now have a global overclass which makes all the major economic decisions, and makes them in entire independence of the legislatures, and *a fortiori* of the will of the voters, of any given country. The money accumulated by this overclass is as easily used for illegal purposes [...], as it is for legal ones. The absence of a global polity means that the super-rich can operate without any thought of any interests save their own."<sup>2</sup>

"'Christian Socialism' is pleonastic: nowadays you cannot hope for the fraternity which the Gospels preach without hoping that democratic governments will *redistribute* money and opportunity in a way that the market never will. [...] It is as true as it was in 1848 that the rich will always try to get richer by making the poor poorer."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard. Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. III. *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 235.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 233.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 205. (Italics added.)

## 5) The Self-Understanding of Philosophy, or what is philosophy good for – an internal tension in Rorty's thought?

In his autobiographical sketch Rorty writes: “[Since my initial disillusion] I have spent 40 years looking for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for.” He thought “If philosophy can be, at best, only what Hegel called ‘its time held in thought’, still that might be enough. [...] So even if there were no such thing as ‘understanding the world’ in the Platonic sense [...] perhaps there was still a social use for my talents, and for the study of philosophy.”<sup>1</sup>

Before attempting to spell out how “philosophy as time held in thought” may be related to Rorty's understanding of philosophy and of how he is practising it, let me pick up an objection which Michael Williams put forward: “Rorty's [...] Irony depends essentially on a kind of *nostalgie de la vérité*.”<sup>2</sup>

Now it is my claim that Rorty is a moralist who does not want to be one. Underlying his ironical way of doing his antis or nons is a criticism of the age, perhaps also a bit of condemnation (sometimes he has gone so far as to speak about our age in terms of “a dark time,” urging philosophers to do their best “to bring light to a dark time”<sup>3</sup>). But then of course, it would run against mainstream liberalism, the sense of Deweyan democracy – it would be wholly incompatible with the American, that is the optimistic, future-oriented way of viewing things – to condemn your fellow humans or fellow-philosophers. Adoption of Heidegger's distinction between the authentic-inauthentic would surely be elitistic, anti-democratic. The result is irony. Recently, he wrote: “My native country has world-historical importance only because it cast itself in the role of vanguard of a global egalitarian utopia. It no longer casts itself in that role, and is therefore in danger of losing its soul. The spirit which animated the writing of Whitman and Dewey is no longer present.”<sup>4</sup> Rorty is tempted by the sort of *Kulturkritik*, *Zeitdiagnose*, so characteristic of German philosophy or of the attitude of German philosophers, attempting, at the same time, to retain the traditionally democratic spirit of American pragmatism. Rorty finds the idea of philosophy doing apologetics or (as I would day, ideology) repugnant, and he appears as an *Aufklärer*, critic of ideology. To make both ends meet, to be committed to a future-oriented optimistic view and not to overlook but direct your attention to the indecencies of your times is not easy. This originates in a tension inherent in Rorty's thought.

From what I have been saying follows that this is a tension inherent in the thing itself rather than simply in the philosopher's mind. I think that it is Rorty's merit to have assumed this tension and not to have easily gotten rid of it. This, in addition to other possible aspects, constitutes, in my eyes, an essential part of Rorty's legacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubt* (Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 363, note.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 229.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 234.